leading politicians who had been tainted by the politics of the last 18 months seemed to accelerate his acceptance. During the first few months of 1784, Pitt’s strategies appeared to be working so that the majority of the opposition was in the single figures. The second strand of Pitt’s work was to gain support out of the House of Commons. He tried to assure people with his command of financial issues, that he was willing to cultivate interests rather than offend them but was nevertheless interested in some types of reform. This meant that he gained both reformist and conservative minded support. Although the Crown’s support was important for Pitt to win the election, Pitt appears to have been genuinely popular in many of the larger constituencies where it would have been almost impossible to bribe one’s way to victory.

On 2 March 1784, Pitt asked the King to dissolve Parliament and call a general election. This was a tactical use of the King’s power as this hugely favoured Pitt over Fox due to his successful first few months in office and his gaining of support in constituencies such as Yorkshire and Middlesex. Meanwhile the King aided Pitt by using patronage to bribe smaller constituencies into voting for Pitt. The election was successful for Pitt with him securing a majority of 120 in the House of Commons.

**Pitt’s dominance of politics**

There are many arguments over how Pitt was able to dominate politics for so many years. The three principle arguments were that Pitt was fortunate and was in the right place at the right time, that Pitt was an astute and skillful politician and that Pitt established the new Tory party as the basis of his own support.

There is argument that Pitt was simply the right politician in the right place at the right time. The King saw Pitt as an antidote to the threat he believed to be posed by Fox and Rockingham Whigs. George III very much liked Pitt and supported him with patronage and was happy for him to get on with the job and in the end the issue of Catholic Emancipation was what toppled Pitt and that was the only issue over which the King and Pitt disagreed which goes to show that the moment Pitt lost royal support he could no longer retain his power. Pitt also had an untarnished reputation and his image as a man of principle made him popular with independent MPs who had grown increasingly tired of political in-fighting which had characterised political life. There is also some suggestion that Pitt was fortunate in that he built a reputation of being an effective financial reformer on the back of the strength of the British economy at the start of the industrial age. Also the circumstances of the 1790s when the fears of the revolution in France dominated political life in Britain and undermined Fox’s credibility as an alternative to Pitt as Prime Minister.

Modern historians generally reject the view that it was purely down to luck and the support of George III that saw Pitt dominate politics. Whilst this relationship was important, Pitt had a very good professional grasp of complex administrative and financial issues of the day and that grasp of detail coupled with excellent oratory skills and delivery made him a formidable opponent in debate. There are many examples of Pitt illustrating his own skill and ability to adapt to changing circumstances:
Cato Street Conspiracy

Organised by a number of Spenceans who had been involved in the Spa Fields riots, the February 1820 Cato Street Conspiracy who arguably the most extreme and revolutionary action of the period. The plan was to assassinate the whole of Lord Liverpool’s cabinet as they gathered for a dinner party at Lord Harrowby’s house if Grosvenor Square on the evening of 22 February. However, the spy George Edwards knew about the plan from its outset and it led to the arrest of Arthur Thistlewood and four other conspirators on Cato Street and they were executed for treason.

Queen Caroline Affair

In 1795, Caroline of Brunswick married her first cousin the future George IV, the Prince of Wales. The marriage was a disaster from the start and the couple were separated by the next year. She was declared not guilty of adultery in 1806 and in 1814 she settled in Italy. She returned in 1820 when George IV was crowned King and she wished to claim her position as Queen and after refusing £50,000 a year to stay away offer from the government, she landed in Dover. The next month, a Bill of Pains and Penalties was passed and the government forced a divorce that stripped her of her queenship.

The unpopularity of George IV and the government's involvement on his behalf made Caroline a revolutionary figurehead and during the summer and autumn of 1820 huge crowds gathered to demonstrate their support. The government subsequently abandoned the Bill of Pains, however in January 1821 her own support was lost when she accepted a pension of £50,000 and refused £50,000 a year to stay away offer from the government, she landed in Dover. The next month, a Bill of Pains and Penalties was passed and the government forced a divorce that stripped her of her queenship.

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Government response to the radical threat

Habeas Corpus was suspended in 1817 along with the Seditious Meetings Act. Following the Peterloo Massacre the government passed six laws (all passed in December 1819):

- Seditious Meetings Prevention Act: gave local magistrates extensive power to restrict public meetings
- Seizure of Arms Act: gave local magistrates powers to seize local arms
- Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act: allowed local magistrates to conduct searches and seize blasphemous or seditious publications
- Training Prevention Act: banned all unauthorised paramilitary drilling and training
- Newspaper and Stamp Duties Act: introduced a four pence stamp duty on newspapers in an attempt to ensure that the price of radical newspapers was beyond the means of most members of the working class
Peel's Gaols Act which meant that prisons had to be inspected by local magistrates, prison discipline, medical and educational facilities were to be standardised, female prisoners were to be guarded by female warders and prison chaplains were allowed to visit prisons on a regular basis. Peel also passed other legal reforms: in 1826 and 1827 a total of seven acts were passed which changes the rules over the selection of juries and streamlined criminal law with 278 statutes repealed. The metropolitan police were introduced in 1829.

On the face of it Peel's reforms seem to be more liberal with the number of capital offences being reduced and the quality of life of prisoners being increased. However, the number of convictions did not decrease as now juries were more inclined to convict people due to the punishments being less harsh. Sidmouth, the previous home secretary may have been very un-liberal but Peel was no more liberal and he was still in favour of whipping prisoners and his introduction of a police force was seen as very repressive. While he streamlined a very ineffective justice system, he was not ideologically liberal and was not faced with the radical threat the 'reactionary' Tories were which lead to much of the repressive legislation of the previous decade.

**Economic reforms**

Huskisson implemented various economic reforms such as a reduction in duties. It was argued that lower tariffs on goods would mean lower prices for consumers and therefore higher profits for manufactures, so duties on silk, wool, glass and others were reduced and the tariffs on manufactures fell from 50% to 20%. In 1825 the duties on coal were removed as was window duty on small houses. These measures helped stimulate trade and employment. The Reciprocity of Duties Act (1823) allowed the government to negotiate trading terms with individual nations and these deals were made with Prussia, Sweden and Denmark, these treaties reduced tariffs and increased trade. The Navigations Acts (passed in 1650) were relaxed in 1823. This act meant that only British ships were allowed to transport British goods as a result their relaxation meant trade from the colonies could arrive on non-British ships which increased the volume of trade and allowed a freer flow of trade. The Corn Laws were also relaxed in 1828 as a sliding scale was introduced on them to replace the 80 shillings fixed rate. Trade Unions were also reformed following pressure from radical MPs Francis Burdett and Joseph Hume for repeal of the Combinations Act that banned trade unions. The 1799 Combinations Act was repealed and replaced with the Combinations Act of 1824 which legalised trade unions and strikes. As soon as the Combinations Act was passed there was an upsurge in union activity and strikes and therefore the government backtracked and passed the Amending Act of 1825 which allowed trade unions to be formed but prevented them from striking.

Thomas Wallace was the Vice President of the Board of Trade between 1821 and 1823 and he began a process of rationalising and simplifying the complex legislation which weighed down trade with some 2000 separate statutes. This was a move towards a more liberal economic approach which Huskisson receives credit for. The economic policies during this period were largely more liberal but this was due to the end of the war which made the opportunities for increased and freer trade greater.
The Great Reform Act

Unreformed electoral system

The electoral system which had survived unchanged through the 18th and 19th centuries was known as ‘Old Corruption’ by the radical groups calling for its reform. Power was held by the landed elite and the size of the constituencies was hugely uneven and inconsistent. It has been estimated that only 5% of the population were able to vote and there was no consistency at all within the system. Whatever the size or population of your county you would return two MPs to parliament with very few people having the vote in certain areas, certain landlords had control over who was to be returned to parliament. There was a voting qualification of 40 shilling rental value per annum and this meant in certain regions of the country due to cheap land prices very wealthy people still could not vote. Boroughs were hugely inconsistent with some large urban centres having no representation and then some towns which were important in medieval times but had since decayed still returning two MPs.

There were various types of borough constituencies:

- Rotten boroughs that were controlled by a single land owner (Example: Old Sarum)
- Pocket boroughs were effectively the same with one wealthy land owner able to control the result (Malton, Yorkshire)
- Scot and lot constituencies were where anyone who paid local taxes could vote (Example: Walingford)
- Potwalloper constituencies were where men qualified to vote if their house’s fireplace was large enough to boil a pot (Example: Preston)
- Corporations could only be voted in if you were a member of the town council (Example: Bath)
- Freeman constituencies were where you could vote if you had gained the title of freeman through apprenticeship in a craft guild (Example: Nottingham)

Also two thirds of all local elections were uncontested – nobody would stand against a successful candidate who had the backing of the local landlord. Elections would take several weeks and the overall result for the election might not be known for 2 months. There was also no secret ballot, votes were cast on an open platform called the Hustings. There was often a drunken carnival atmosphere on election days.

Political parties and reform

Whilst Lord Liverpool was Prime Minister, any attempt at reform was robustly resisted. Edmund Burke in 1790 had written his Reflection on the Revolution in France which warned Britain that even moderate reform would lead to violent revolution. In response to demands for reform, the Tory government developed a number of arguments in defence of the unreformed system. These arguments included:

- Reform would interfere with a system which had grown naturally and organically out of Britain’s past